



Student Teachers: drummer Laura Davis-Chanin (second, right), and inset, below

Young Americans

The fast times of **Laura Davis-Chanin**, the teenage punk drummer who ran with Blondie and Bowie...

"HONESTLY, we were a little too young for that freedom," declares Laura Davis-Chanin in the intro to *The Girl In The Back*, her new memoir of the thrilling, chaotic life she lived for three years from 1978 as

the drummer with New York new wavers Student Teachers, a band she joined aged just 16.

The Girl In The Back is a pacy and vivid account, featuring many of the era's main players: boyfriend Jimmy Destri of Blondie, with whom she co-wrote "Slow Motion" and "Angels On The Balcony"; Debbie Harry and Chris Stein; supporter and friend David Bowie; producer Terry Ork; the Des Barres... these and other starchy associations were powered by cocaine and endless white russians, although Davis-Chanin stuck with her high-school studies throughout. The ride slammed to a stop in 1980, when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

Davis-Chanin has chosen to write the book as she lived it, without the benefit of hindsight, to maintain the sense of wonder and exhilaration. Yet clearly the tale is also one of a teenager at risk, since her single-parent father (the art critic of *Newsweek*) was largely absent and her relationship with Destri was abusive. "It was a different time, not just in the way people parented, but also historically," she says. "We were coming out of the '50s, where we had a family existence and then we moved into the '60s, where there was a lot of political upheaval; when we got to the '70s, we were living in downtown Manhattan, quite a revolutionary place. It was weird to grow up in that world."

Given the stature of the musicians she was mixing with, did Davis-Chanin ever feel starstruck? "Jimmy had brought up many times this idea of living in a bubble, and that's what the song '11:59' is about. That bubble becomes

"Downtown Manhattan was a revolutionary place. It was weird to grow up in that world"

LAURA DAVIS-CHANIN

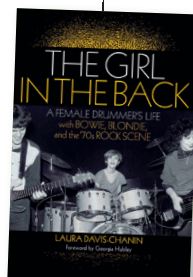
the reality, so to a point, nothing registered. Also, when you're involved in a lot of drugs and alcohol, your sense of reality has shifted."

After the double blow of being fired from Student Teachers ("very sad, but we're reconnected now") and then receiving her diagnosis, Davis-Chanin went on to qualify as a lawyer, a switch encouraged by Bowie over dinner one evening, after she and Destri had seen him perform in *The Elephant Man*. "He was saying, 'You don't have to be in rock'n'roll. You don't have to be here.' It was critical for me, because here's this icon of music and a phenomenal human being granting me permission to do what I want to do, which is not in rock'n'roll."

Yet 40 years later, Davis-Chanin has been drawn back. As well as her own memoir, she is co-writing the autobiography of flamboyant music mogul Michael Alago. If she could rewind to 1978, would she do it all again? "Probably, even though with perspective, I know my heart was

more in academia. But I'm a person who, if I see a challenge, I'm going for it." **SHARON O'CONNELL**

The Girl In The Back: A Female Drummer's Life With Bowie, Blondie And The 70s Rock Scene is out now on Backbeat



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